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# An Investigation Into the Retention Policies Regarding Special Needs Students

Ronald Dean Graham

*Eastern Illinois University*

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Date

An Investigation Into the Retention

Policies Regarding Special Needs Students

(TITLE)

BY

Ronald Dean Graham

Field Experience

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Specialist in Education

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1995

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

12-21-95

DATE

 ADVISER

12-21-95

DATE

 DEPARTMENT HEAD

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the retention of special needs students in the Sangamon Area Special Education District (SASED) in Illinois. All of the principals of grades K-8 and the special education coordinators that work in those districts in SASED were surveyed. Inconsistencies in SASED's current practices led the author to explore possible alternatives in helping the Multidisciplinary Conferences (MDC) result in better decisions concerning the retention of special needs students. The results of the surveys were analyzed to develop a policy for all the districts to follow. This study focused on two objectives:

1. To determine if the policies on retention of special needs students were the same as those for regular education students.
2. To determine what factors were utilized in decisions concerning retention of special needs students.

# Special Education Retention

## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Chapter I: Overview of the Problem.....                                | 3  |
| Introduction.....  | 3  |
| Statement of the Problem.....  | 5  |
| Project Objectives.....  | 5  |
| Assumptions.....   | 6  |
| Delimitations.....   | 6  |
| Operational Definitions.....   | 6  |
| Chapter II: Review of Literature and Research.....                     | 9  |
| Chapter III: Design of the Study.....                                  | 14 |
| Overview.....  | 14 |
| Sample and Population.....   | 15 |
| Instrumentation.....   | 15 |
| Data Analysis.....   | 16 |
| Chapter IV: Results.....   | 17 |
| Overview.....  | 17 |
| Results For Survey Question 1.....                                     | 17 |
| Results For Survey Question 2.....                                     | 17 |
| Results For Survey Question 3.....                                     | 18 |
| Results For Survey Question 4.....                                     | 19 |
| Results For Survey Question 5.....                                     | 20 |
| Chapter V: Summary, Findings, Conclusions, and<br>Recommendations..... | 22 |
| Summary.....   | 22 |
| Findings.....  | 22 |
| Conclusions.....   | 23 |
| Recommendations.....   | 23 |
| References .....   | 25 |
| Appendices .....   | 27 |
| Appendix A.....  | 27 |
| Appendix B.....  | 28 |
| Appendix C.....  | 30 |
| Appendix D.....  | 32 |

## Chapter I

## Overview of the Problem

Introduction

Retention policies for school systems have been in place for many years. The debate over the effectiveness of retention has continued. Educators have been torn between students who could benefit from being retained and those students who have been emotionally scarred from the process. In the field of special education, students must be evaluated to determine if they meet the criteria established by special education. Once a handicapping condition has been diagnosed for a student, a plan based on his/her handicapping condition is followed. With the passing of P.L. 94-142 (Act), 1975, and the newest P.L. 102-476, 1991, commonly known as IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), students with handicaps have followed individual education plans (IEP) to guide their educational process. The basic premise of an IEP has been to modify/adapt a student's academic work which allows him/her to succeed. Also, the modifications have been made so a student's knowledge, rather than his/her handicap, is tested.

Philosophically, any student may be retained. When a special needs student does not comply with his/her IEP, and after a multidisciplinary conference (MDC) has

determined it was the student's choice not to perform up to his/her capabilities, then the school may use the same standards for retention that are used in the case of a regular education student.

The major problem which led to the selection of this study was the need to establish a cohesive policy that would help guide the decision making process of the MDC concerning student retention. Further, it was the perception of this author that such a policy would be politically advantageous from the perception of each local school district.

The setting of this study encompassed the following Illinois school districts: Ashland/Chandlerville, Athens, Auburn, Ball/Chatham, Divernon, Girard, Greenview, Illiopolis, Pawnee, Pleasant Plains, Porta, Riverton, Rochester, Tri-City, Virden, Virginia, and Williamsville. These schools comprised the Sangamon Area Special Education District (SASED) which services the Illinois counties of Sangamon, Macoupin, Cass, and Menard Counties (see Appendix A). SASED covers over 3600 miles and services over 15,000 students.

The completion of this study resulted in a proposal being presented to the SASED board of directors. This proposal recommended guidelines on how retentions would be handled in SASED.

This study should affect the special education departments of each member school. Also, it was anticipated that information from this study would be shared with all administrators of each district and with the SASED's director.

### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate the retention policies regarding special needs students currently being implemented in schools belonging to the Sangamon Area Special Education District (SASED) in Illinois. Specifically, this study focused on grades kindergarten through eighth grade. The principals and special education coordinators of SASED were surveyed to elicit their perceptions on the practice of retention of special needs students. The data collected were used to develop a proposed retention policy for SASED.

### Project Objectives

The objectives of this project were:

1. To determine if the policies on retention of special needs students were the same as those for regular education students.
2. To determine what factors were utilized in decisions concerning retention of special needs students.



### Assumptions

It was assumed that the perceptions of the principals and special education coordinators would have provided meaningful information pertaining to the policy of retention of special need students.

### Delimitations

Outside the scope of this study were behavior disorder students that were housed separately at SASSED. Also, this study only surveyed administrators and coordinators from SASSED.

### Operational Definitions

The following definitions are germane for the understanding of this study:

Behavior Disorder: A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics:

1. an inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, health, cultural, or linguistic factors;
2. an inability to develop or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and adults;
3. inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances;
4. a general pervasive mood of anxiety, unhappiness, depression;

5. a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. These characteristics must be exhibited over an extended period of time and to a marked degree. In addition, an adverse effect on educational performances must be noted even after supportive assistance has been provided (SASED, 1993).

Inclusion: A process by which special needs students are placed in a regular education setting in which support services are used.

Individual Educational Program: A written statement for a special needs student that provides at least a statement of: the child's present levels of educational performance; annual goals and objectives; related services; the extent of participation in the regular education program; dates for initiation of services; duration of services; evaluation procedures; and a schedule for annual determination of short-term objectives (SASED, 1993).

Multidisciplinary Conference: Deliberation among appropriate persons for the purpose of determining eligibility for special education, developing recommendations for special education placement, reviewing education or termination of special education for an individual child (SASED, 1993).

Regular Education Initiative: A concept which focuses on special and regular education staff to work together.

Retention: An approach that school districts use to have a student repeat the same grade.

SASED: The Sangamon Area Special Education District in Illinois consisting of 17 school districts. This cooperative was developed to better serve the area's special need students.

Special Education Coordinator: An individual working for SASED that has several school districts to maintain. SASED has six coordinators maintaining 17 school districts.

Special Needs Students: Those students who require a different educational approach and support services to reach their potential.

## Chapter II

## Review of Literature and Research

Research indicated American schools were essentially ungraded through the mid-nineteenth century. German influence soon changed the educational philosophy in the United States, and by 1870 all schools were graded. At this time it became clear that not all students could master the content at the same level as other students. Retention then became common practice when a student did not meet the standards set by the school. It became apparent that retaining students was becoming a problem. As high as 50% of the students were being retained in the primary grades by 1900 (Barlow, 1990).

Smeltz (1945) indicated that students who were retained exhibited the following characteristics: (a) absenteeism; (b) poor health; (c) lack of interest in school; (d) poor home conditions; (e) putting forth little effort; and (f) low academic ability. Smith and Shepard (1987) also found that males were retained more often than females, minorities were retained more often than the non-minorities, working class students were retained more often than middle class students, physically smaller students were retained more often than normal students, and more aggressive students were retained more often than students who did not exhibit such behavior.

The effects of retention were studied by Jackson (1975) who drew two major conclusions:

"There is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties.... Thus, those educators who retain pupils in a grade do so without valid research evidence to indicate that such treatment will provide greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than will promotion to the next grade.

Second, the accumulated research evidence is so poor that valid inferences cannot be drawn concerning the relative benefits of these two options" (p.627).

A more recent study by Peterson, DeGracie, and Ayabe (1987) revealed that retentions with remediation were far more beneficial than retention alone. The study revealed that a specific educational plan should be established for each child being retained.

Smith and Shepard (1987) noted that teachers did not see students "farther down the line" in the educational system. Teachers could not compare what a student was doing in his/her class after being retained to the

benefits that child could be having if he/she was promoted.

Doyle (1989) tried to persuade educators that all children had a right to be placed in a learning environment where the best education could be given. Individual differences in a classroom may affect what a student could or could not master. It has been estimated that 14% of the students in a typical classroom are special need students, including 3% learning disabled, 3% behavior/emotional disordered, and 3% mentally retarded (Gearheart & Weishahn, 1980). These numbers were bound to go up with the acceptance of such terms as Regular Education Initiative (REI) and inclusion.

Smith and Shepard (1990) summarized the following data on grade retention:

1. Grade failures are as high today as they were earlier in the century.
2. Students who have been retained usually perform more poorly when they go on to the next grade than if they had been promoted.
3. Dropouts were more likely to have repeated a grade than students who graduate from high school.
4. Children rated the possibilities of repeating a grade as more stressful than wetting in class or being caught stealing.

5. Students rated going blind or losing a parent as the two events more stressful than being retained.

6. It was estimated that retaining students was costly to school districts.

7. Almost 100% of the students who were retained twice dropped out of school.

8. Alternatives were available that were more effective than retention.

Legally, special needs students were guided by P.L. 94-142, 1975, which allowed students a "free appropriate education." The Board of Education v. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176, 1982, explored the meaning of "free appropriate education." The Rowley standard followed two basic guidelines:

1. Has the school district complied with the procedures set forth by law?

2. Did the school provide the student with a beneficial education? (Rowley, 1982)

Rowley also recognized parental participation as being an important means of ensuring a school district's compliance with the law. Polk v. Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit 16, 0853 F. 2d 171 (3rd 1988), determined the level of benefit must be meaningful. Trivial educational advancement would not meet the needs of the student.

In spite of the research, a number of educators have continued to believe that retention was a good policy. Even special educators felt if a student decided not to do

his/her work, he/she should be retained. Policies need to be examined to determine what factors are used for the retention of special needs students. SASSED had a comprehensive guide on what should be in an IEP (see Appendix B) and what should be done in an MDC (see Appendix C). However, nowhere were there guidelines on the retention of special needs students. The previous review of literature and research demonstrated the need for uniform guidelines when making decisions concerning the possibility of retention of a special needs student.



## Chapter III

## Design Of The Study

Overview

The study was carried out by the researcher who is the principal at Virden Middle School. The participants involved were the K-8 principals and the coordinators from the schools which belong to the Sangamon Area Special Education District (SASED) in Illinois. Surveys were sent to 35 principals and six were mailed to the coordinators. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was included with the survey to assist in the return of the completed surveys. A total of 28 surveys were returned by the principals with an 80% completion rate. Four were returned by the coordinators with a 67% completion rate. Thirty two total surveys were returned with a 78% completion rate.

These individuals to were surveyed to ascertain information on the following objectives:

1. To determine if the policies on retention of special needs students were the same as those for regular education students.
2. To determine what factors were utilized in decisions concerning retention of special needs students.

### Sample and Population

The Sangamon Area Special Education District (SASED) provided a list of all the principals and coordinators within its boundaries. The list contained names and addresses of buildings which included any combination of grades K-8 and administrators of each building. Surveys were also sent to the coordinators whose offices are located in SASED's main building in Springfield.

A total of 35 surveys were mailed to principals and six were mailed to the coordinators. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was included with the survey to assist in the return of the completed surveys. A total of 28 surveys were returned by the principals with an 80% completion rate. Four were returned by the coordinators with a 67% completion rate. Thirty two total surveys were returned with a 78% completion rate.

### Instrumentation

Appendix D presents the survey used to collect information pertaining to the retention of special needs students. The survey was created by the author of this study. Also, this survey was piloted by the special education teachers at Virden Middle School and by Dr. Donald Smitley. The data obtained by the surveys were

used to develop a policy which will be presented to the SASSED director to determine if it should be presented to the full board at SASSED.

#### Data Analysis

The survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages.

## Chapter IV

### Results

#### Overview

The results are presented for each of the survey questions through a narrative and a table of the results.

#### Results For Survey Question #1

Survey question 1 asked the administrators if their schools had a formal retention plan. As indicated in Table 1, 50% of the schools had a formal retention plan and 44% did not. Six per cent did not respond.

Table 1

#### Formal Retention Plan

---

| Does your school have a | YES      | NO       | NR     | TOTAL |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|--------|-------|
| formal retention plan?  | 16 (50%) | 14 (44%) | 2 (6%) | 32    |

---

#### Results For Survey Question #2

Survey question 2 asked the administrators if their schools retained special needs students. As shown in Table 2, 44% of the schools retained special needs students while 53% did not. Three per cent did not respond.

Table 2

Retention of Special Needs Students


---

| Does your school retain | YES      | NO       | NR     | TOTAL |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|--------|-------|
| special needs students? | 14 (44%) | 17 (53%) | 1 (3%) | 32    |

---

Results For Survey Question #3

Survey question 3 asked the administrators if their schools used the same retention plan for both special needs students and regular education students. As indicated in Table 3, 44% of the schools used the same plan while 53% did not. Three per cent did not respond.

Table 3

Retention Plans for regular and special needs students


---

| Does your school use the | YES      | NO       | NR     | TOTAL |
|--------------------------|----------|----------|--------|-------|
| same retention plan for  |          |          |        |       |
| both regular and special |          |          |        |       |
| needs students.          | 14 (44%) | 17 (53%) | 1 (3%) | 32    |

---

Results For Survey Question #4

Survey question 4 asked the principals and the coordinators if they felt that a retention policy was needed by SASED. As shown in Table 4, 46% of the principals believed a policy was needed while 54% did not. Table 5 reveals that 100% of the coordinators believed that a policy was not needed.

Table 4

Principal's Need for a Policy


---

|                              |          |         |    |       |
|------------------------------|----------|---------|----|-------|
| Do you feel that a retention | YES      | NO      | NR | TOTAL |
| policy is needed for SASED?  | 13 (46%) | 15 (54) | 0  | 28    |

---

Table 5

Coordinator's Need for a Policy


---

|                              |     |          |    |       |
|------------------------------|-----|----------|----|-------|
| Do you feel that a retention | YES | NO       | NR | TOTAL |
| policy is needed for SASED?  | 0   | 4 (100%) | 0  | 4     |

---

Results For Survey Question #5

Survey question 5 asked the principals and the coordinators to evaluate nine possible reasons to retain a special needs student. As indicated in Table 6, 72% of the principals and coordinators strongly agreed or agreed that absenteeism (A) was a reason to retain a special needs student. Only 14% strongly agreed or agreed that age (B) was a reason to retain a special needs student. Sixty-six per cent indicated they strongly agreed or agreed that grade level achievement (C) was a reason to retain special needs students. Fifty-four per cent of the principals and coordinators strongly agreed or agreed that transiency (D) was a reason to retain a special needs student. Only 28% indicated that school behavior (E) was a reason to retain a special needs student. Fifty-six per cent indicated that immaturity (F) was a reason to retain a special needs student. Fifty five per cent of the principals and coordinators strongly agreed or agreed that previous retentions (G) should be considered when retaining a special needs student. Seventy-five per cent strongly agreed or agreed that a teacher's recommendation (H) was a reason to retain a special needs student. Only 44% believed parental involvement in school activities or conferences (I) was a reason to retain a special needs student.

Table 6

Possible Reasons for Retentions


---

|                    | SA       | A        | D        | SDA      | NR     | TOTAL |
|--------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|--------|-------|
| A. ABSENTEEISM     | 11 (34%) | 12 (38%) | 5 (16%)  | 3 (9%)   | 1 (3%) | 32    |
| B. AGE             | 3 (9%)   | 11 (34%) | 9 (28%)  | 7 (22%)  | 2 (6%) | 32    |
| C. GRADE LEVEL     |          |          |          |          |        |       |
| ACHIEVEMENT        | 9 (28%)  | 12 (38%) | 5 (16%)  | 6 (19%)  | 0      | 32    |
| D. TRANSIENCY      | 4 (13%)  | 13 (41%) | 9 (28%)  | 5 (16%)  | 1 (3%) | 32    |
| E. SCHOOL BEHAVIOR | 3 (9%)   | 6 (19%)  | 12 (38%) | 9 (28%)  | 2 (6%) | 32    |
| F. IMMATURITY      | 3 (9%)   | 15 (47%) | 8 (25%)  | 4 (13%)  | 2 (6%) | 32    |
| G. PREVIOUS        |          |          |          |          |        |       |
| RETENTIONS         | 4 (13%)  | 7 (22%)  | 5 (16%)  | 15 (47%) | 1 (3%) | 32    |
| H. TEACHER         |          |          |          |          |        |       |
| RECOMMENDATION     | 11 (34%) | 13 (41%) | 4 (13%)  | 3 (9%)   | 1 (3%) | 32    |
| I. PARENTAL        |          |          |          |          |        |       |
| INVOLVEMENT        | 5 (16%)  | 9 (28%)  | 9 (28%)  | 8 (25%)  | 1 (3%) | 32    |

---

STRONGLY AGREE (SA), AGREE (A), DISAGREE (D), STRONGLY DISAGREE (SDA),  
NO RESPONSE (NR)

---



## Chapter V

### Summary, Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### Summary

The study was carried out by the researcher who is the principal at Virden Middle School. The participants involved were the K-8 principals and the coordinators from the schools which belong to the Sangamon Area Special Education District (SASED) in Illinois. Surveys were sent to these individuals to ascertain information on the following objectives:

1. To determine if the policies on retention of special needs students were the same as those for regular education students.
2. To determine what factors were utilized in decisions concerning retention of special needs students.

#### Findings

After reviewing the results of the surveys, several facts are evident. Approximately 50% of SASED schools do not have a formal plan to retain a special needs student. Also, approximately 50% of the principals believe that a policy is needed. Principals and coordinators agreed that a special needs student should be retained if the following reasons were found:

1. Teacher recommendations, 75%
2. Absenteeism, 72%
3. Grade level achievement, 66%

Another finding showed that only 42% found age to be a determining factor. Of the 18 administrators who commented on the survey, 14 (77%) believed each case needed to be examined individually.

### Conclusions

It was clear from the findings that administrators (coordinator and principal) in the same building did not agree on what to do with special needs students. The special education coordinators did not believe a policy was needed, where as approximately 50% of the principals believed that one was needed. As a result of this finding, this author concluded that SASSED needed to adopt a policy for each school district to follow. The special education coordinators would benefit from a policy while conducting the multidisciplinary conference (MDC) because all participants would be working from the same policy. Furthermore, the policy should act as a guide that the MDC should use on each individual case. Again, if a policy was established, it would aid the participants of the MDC to generate an effective decision.

### Recommendations

As a result of this study, the author presented the following proposed policy on retention of special needs students to Mr. Don Long, the Director of SASSED:

Special needs students who are being retained must meet the following criteria:

1. The reason the child is being retained is not related to his/her handicap.

2. Teachers, both regular and special needs, must reach a consensus that the child must be retained.

3. The following factors need to be considered for a child's retention if he/she is not following the guidelines set by the IEP:

- A. Absenteeism
- B. Grade level achievement
- C. Immaturity
- D. Transiency
- E. Previous retentions
- F. Parental Involvement

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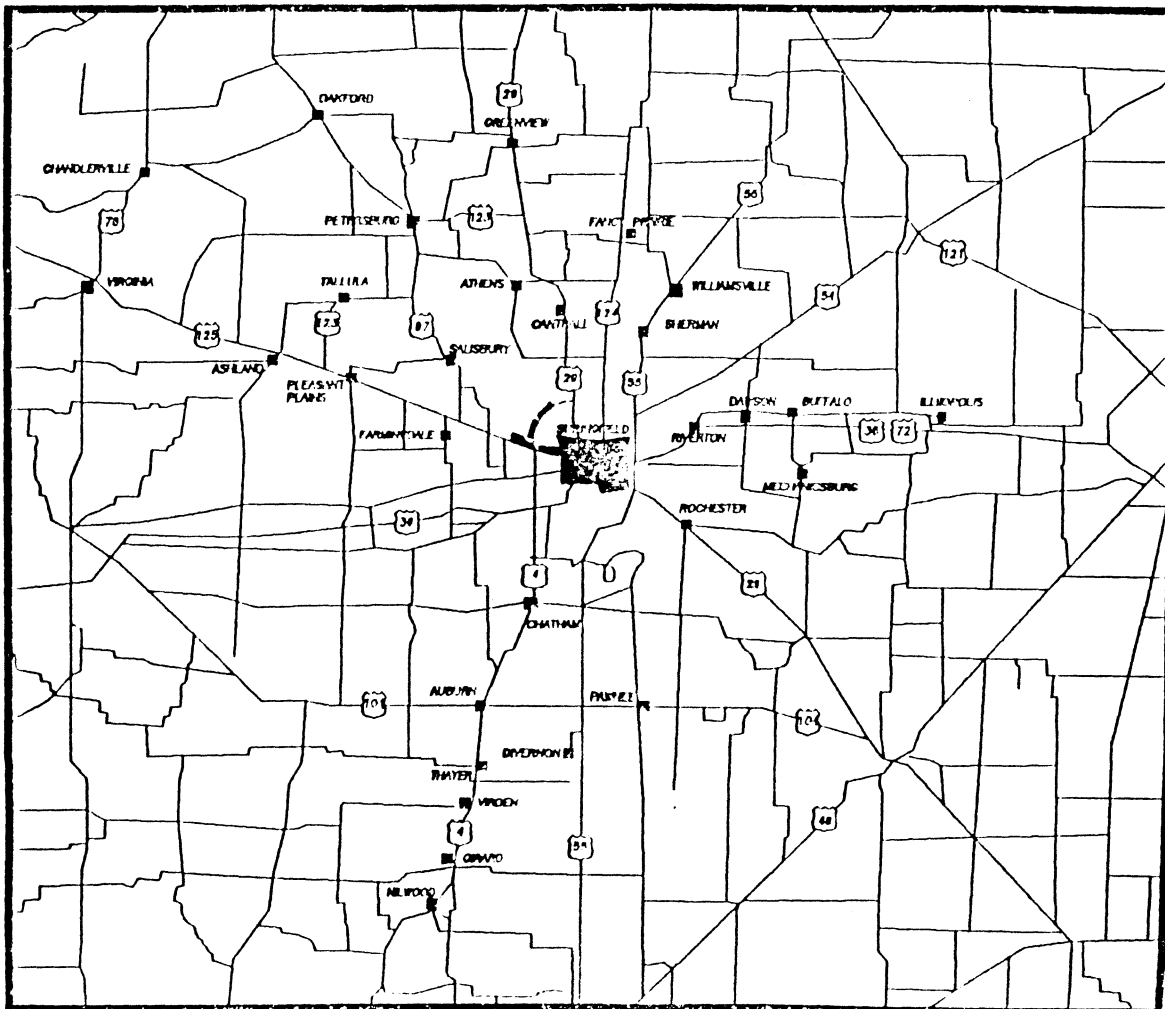
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APPENDIX A

SANGAMON AREA SPECIAL EDUCATION REGION



DRAFTING & DESIGN DEPARTMENT, CAPITAL AREA VOCATIONAL CENTER

## APPENDIX B

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM FORMS

#### IEP REQUIREMENTS

State and federal laws and regulations require that all eligible children and youth with disabilities have available to them a free and appropriate public education which includes special education and related services to meet their unique needs and is provided in conformity with an Individual Education Program (IEP). For preschool children, ages three through five, who have been determined to be eligible for special education and related services, an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) may be used to fulfill the requirement to develop an IEP prior to providing special education and related services if the IFSP meets all the requirements of an IEP.

The IEP is a management tool that is developed by parents or a guardian and school personnel to ensure that each child/youth with a disability is provided special education and related services that are appropriate to his/her special learning needs as identified in the Multidisciplinary Conference (MDC). Each IEP must include:

1. Statements of the student's present levels of educational performance;
2. Annual goals statements and attendant short-term instructional objectives. This would include transition goals statements and attendant short-term objectives which identify services needed by students aged 16 years and older (age 14 or younger if appropriate) for transition from special education programs to employment, post-secondary education, and community living alternatives.
3. Identification of the specific special education and related services required.
4. Statements which identify the educational settings in which all educational and related services will be provided and explain the reasoning for the placement decisions.
5. Projected dates for initiation of services and anticipated duration of the services:
6. Appropriate (a) objective criteria (b) evaluation procedures, (c) schedules for determining (at least annually) the student's progress toward meeting goals and objectives.



## APPENDIX C

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING MULTIDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE SUMMARY REPORT

#### General Purpose

A multidisciplinary conference (MDC) is conducted as a result of

1. a referral for evaluation of a possible disability of a child or youth for which special education and related services would be required,
2. a request for reevaluation of a student who is currently receiving special education services,
3. recommended termination of special education for one or more disabilities (includes students who complete special education programs and return full time to regular education and students who complete programs for a disability but continue to receive special education for other disabilities. Excludes students who dropout, reach maximum age or graduate. An IEP meeting must be convened prior to terminating special education services for a student who is scheduled to graduate to insure that his/her IEP will be completed.) or
4. fulfillment of the three-year reevaluation requirement for continuation of special education services.

Based on analyses of information from a variety of sources including, where appropriate, a student's aptitude and achievement tests, academic performance, physical condition, social and cultural background and adaptive behavior and recommendations from his or her teacher, it is responsibility of the MDC to :

1. Determine if the child/youth has one or more disabilities.
2. Determine if the child/youth has one or more disabilities which adversely affect educational performance.
3. Identify the special educational needs that result from the adverse effect caused by the child/youth's disabling condition(s).
4. Determine the relationship, if any, between a student's conduct and his/her disabling condition(s), which, if not related to a disability for which the student was receiving special education, would be considered to be in violation of the district's disciplinary code.

APPENDIX D

Ron Graham, Principal  
Virden Middle School  
Virden, IL 62690

October 13, 1995

Dear Principal/Coordinator,

Attached to this letter is another one of those surveys from a person seeking to get his specialist degree at Eastern Illinois University. I cannot change that fact, but I do need your help in completing my field study.

I am surveying the Sangamon Area Special Education District (SASED) K-8 principals and coordinators. The goal of this project is to develop a guideline. This guideline will help the multidisciplinary conference (MDC) determine if retention is a viable alternative for special needs students.

I have tried to develop a survey that is as painless as possible. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey and send it back by the end of the week. The enclosed stamped envelope is addressed and ready to go. I appreciate your time and effort.

Sincerely,

Ron Graham

## APPENDIX D

Please check the appropriate response.

|                      |       |        |       |
|----------------------|-------|--------|-------|
| Elementary Principal | _____ | Male   | _____ |
| MS/JH Principal      | _____ | Female | _____ |
| K-8 Principal        | _____ |        |       |
| Coordinator          | _____ |        |       |

Please circle the answer the answer that best describe your school's procedures and your belief.

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Does your school have a formal retention plan?   | Yes | No |
| 2. Does your school retain special needs students?  | Yes | No |
| 3. Does your school use the same retention plan<br>for both regular and special needs students?       | Yes | No |
| 4. Do you feel that a retention policy is needed for<br>the Sangamon Area Special Education District? | Yes | No |

Please circle the number that indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with each possible reason for retaining a special needs student.

|   | STRONGLY<br>AGREE | DIS-<br>AGREE | AGREE | STRONGLY<br>DIS-<br>AGREE |
|---|-------------------|---------------|-------|---------------------------|
| A. ABSENTEEISM  | 4                 | 3             | 2     | 1                         |
| B. AGE  | 4                 | 3             | 2     | 1                         |
| C. GRADE LEVEL ACHIEVEMENT                                  | 4                 | 3             | 2     | 1                         |
| D. TRANSIENCY   | 4                 | 3             | 2     | 1                         |
| E. SCHOOL BEHAVIOR  | 4                 | 3             | 2     | 1                         |
| F. IMMATURITY   | 4                 | 3             | 2     | 1                         |
| G. PREVIOUS RETENTIONS                                      | 4                 | 3             | 2     | 1                         |
| H. TEACHER RECOMMENDATION                                   | 4                 | 3             | 2     | 1                         |
| I. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN<br>SCHOOL CONFERENCES/ACTIVITIES | 4                 | 3             | 2     | 1                         |

6. Do you have any additional comments concerning the practice of retaining special needs students?